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Reel Christmas: The Power of Jesus

John 1:29-34

If the point of the Grinch is about not being in the spirit of the Christmas holidays, then I have to admit, sometimes I'm guilty of being a little grinch-ish. This past week, Megan and I took a day to celebrate some of our own family's holiday traditions, just pack all of our favorite things about the holidays into one day. We called it "The Most Wonderful Day of the Year," and we did things like watch our favorite Christmas movies, visit Zoolights, stuff like that. One of my particular contributions to The Most Wonderful Day of the Year was to make Chex mix. I have my own special recipe that I've perfected over the years, and I think it's quite delicious, addicting even. I make a huge batch, about double what the original recipe says to. Megan's contribution to my contribution was to propose that, in the spirit of Christmas, we give away some of my Chex mix to our neighbors. I thought I was fine with that until she started counting off how many neighbors we had to give to. Then she suggested we give three whole cups to each. When we started pouring my precious Chex mix into the bags for our neighbors it became clear three cups was waaaay too much, especially because there wouldn't be any of my precious Chex mix left for me, much less our wonderful neighbors. But that's okay because I can just take another hour and a half to make more with the leftover ingredients, right? Except I'd used up all the Worcester sauce, so we couldn't do that any time soon. Nonetheless we loaded up a bunch of bags of my precious Chex mix for our neighbors and I was really hoping they were grateful for this gift, because I could see the dregs that were leftover for me. At this point, I have to admit... I wouldn't have been surprised to have looked in a mirror and seen green skin and red eyes. I felt quite grinch-ish. Here Megan had a great idea to bless our neighbors, and all I could think about is not enjoying the fruit of my labors. I was totally the Grinch!

Well, if you've ever felt like that then there's good news for you in the Scripture passage we're going to read today. If you've been with us the past couple of weeks, you know we're looking at the story of Christmas through the lens of classic Christmas movies like Elf, Miracle on 34th Street, and of course, How the Grinch Stole Christmas. But we've thrown one more twist in the mix because we haven't been looking at your typical Christmas stories in the Bible with the manger and the angels and whatnot, we've been reading the Christmas story in the Gospel of John. Christmas, at its most essential, is about the coming of Jesus, and that's exactly what John 1 is about. We've learned from John that Jesus is the coming-in-the-flesh personification of all that is good and powerful, he calls him the Word. Any Greek nerds remember the Greek word for Word? Logos! And when the Logos comes he brings his joy, Jesus welcomes us into his family. Pastor Megan shared with us last week that Jesus shows us his grace and his truth when he comes to us. Isn't that what Christmas is all about? The gifts that Jesus brings with his coming: joy, family, grace, truth. But what about the grinchies of our world? What about you and me when we're at our worst? What does Christmas mean for us?

Well, as we've been reading the first chapter of John we see that he's been weaving into his telling of the coming of Jesus another person, John the Baptist. And we skip from Jesus the Logos to Jesus the man, the man who meets John the Baptist. If the Gospel of John were a Star Wars movie, the first couple of verses would have been that opening scroll, ("In a Galaxy Far Far Away") and now we are at the part where the camera pans down and we begin to see the action unfold. Let's take a look at what John the Baptist has to say in John 1:29-34:

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

Man, can you tell how excited John the Baptist is about Jesus? He starts off with, "Look!" It was like a celebrity sighting, times ten. Remember how excited Elf was to see Santa? "SANTAAA!" This is like John the Baptist is doing that for Jesus. So what is it that John is excited about? "The Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!"

Now to get why this is exciting for John the Baptist, you have to remember that John was in the business of repentance. It's in his name. Baptism, for John, was all about repentance. John didn't invent baptism, by the way. Baptism was part of Jewish religious culture years before John came on the scene; it was a kind of ritual cleansing, an acknowledgement that the people of Israel needed to be cleaned. It was a way for people to say, I renounce my former way of doing life, I wipe myself clean of it. The word we use for that kind of decision is "repentance." For John, baptism = repentance.

Repentance isn't a real popular topic nowadays. In fact I did a search on a website called Google Trends, which shows what people are searching for on the internet. Here's the results for "repentance." There's some moderate interest, maybe. But repentance definitely is not the hot topic. Interesting side note, it seems that by far if someone is looking for "repentance" on the internet, they're from Utah for some reason. Now, if I were to pick a modern day opposite of repentance, it's probably "You do you," right? You do you! You don't need to change, just do whatever floats your boat. So here's the results for searches for "you do you" opposite of "repentance." That little smidge of blue on the bottom is repentance. There's no comparison! People are definitely more interested in "doing you," whatever that means, than in repentance.

And I have to wonder, how well is that working out for us? What if "you doing you" isn't actually a great thing? What if you and I are far more like the Grinch than we are like the Whos? If you think about it for a moment, how often do you identify with the Whos? In other words, are you cheerful all the time, living in perfect community with your fellow Whovillians? When all of your stuff is taken away from you, down to the last crumb on the floor, do you *spolier alert* burst into song? And then, are you willing to welcome the thief who stole every last thing in your community into your community and let them host the dinner, cutting the roast beast? Who does that? Or... are you more prone to being annoyed? More prone to being selfish? More prone to be at least a little vindictive sometimes? More prone to be... mean?

And after all, why is a cartoon about a rascal like the Grinch so enjoyable? Why do we delight in the Grinch's antics? Is it perhaps because he reminds us a little bit of ourselves? There's some warrant for this idea. If you read the Worship Guide this morning/evening you'll know that Theodor Geisel, who we know as Dr. Suess, was inspired by himself to write the Grinch. If you're familiar with the story, you may remember that the Grinch had been putting up with the sounds coming from Whoville for 53 years. Guess how old Dr. Suess was when he wrote the book? Yup, 53 years old. And of course, the quote you may have read already, where Dr. Suess tells the story himself: he woke up one morning the day after Christmas and looked in the mirror and realized how mean he looked. When we look in the mirror, are we more like the Grinch or the Whos? And if we are more like the Grinch, then how do you think it's going to work out for "you do you?" Is that really what we need? Was that really what the Grinch needed?

Where we start with John the Baptist is to realize that more than “you be you,” we might need to be saying, “I’m sorry, I won’t do that again.” But... that’s only a start. Because John has more to say. He goes on to contrast his baptism, a baptism of repentance, to Jesus’ baptism. Read again with me verses 32-34.

And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’”

There’s a lot to unpack there, but the main thing I want you to notice is that he contrasts his baptism of repentance to Jesus’ baptism of the Holy Spirit. What’s the difference here?

Let’s go back to the Grinch to help us think about this a little. Let’s imagine that after he commits grand larceny he runs into John the Baptist up in those snow-capped mountains. He hears John the Baptist saying, “You brood of vipers! Bear fruit in keeping with repentance!” This causes the Grinch to reconsider his plan to steal everything, so he tiptoes back down to those houses and puts it all back... and then goes to his cave never to be seen again. After all repentance doesn’t necessarily mean that he has to join the Whos, or even to like them. It simply means that he is sorry for what he’s done and he won’t do it again, right?

But that’s not what happens in the story is it? If you remember, after the Grinch pilfers all of the Christmas things, he makes his way up the mountain to hear the lamentations of the Whos. And as dawn arises, instead of wailing and misery, he hears the Whos singing. And as you watch what happens next, I want you to play close attention to Mr. Grinch, especially his eyes...

Did you see it? His eyes change from the color red, to the color blue. The eyes are the windows of the soul, as they say. The Grinch doesn’t merely repent, he is changed! He is made new! He is made to be like the Whos; he can now join in their festivity, their joy.

This is what John the Baptist recognized. Repentance is good, but it only gets you so far because what we, the Grinches of this world, need, is heart replacement surgery. We need to change. And that is what he means when he says Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit. This isn’t a baptism that’s skin deep, just washing dirt off of skin, this is a baptism that is soul deep, a baptism that changes who we are.

What’s beautiful about this passage in John is that John the Baptist is witness to the culmination of centuries of yearning and promise. Hundreds of years before, God had promised this kind of change through the prophet Ezekiel in 36:25-27

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Do you hear the echoes from this passage in what John the Baptist says almost 600 years after Ezekiel? First the sprinkling of water, the baptism of John, then the new heart and new spirit, the baptism of Jesus. Heart replacement surgery.

Chances are, if you’re aware of any Grinch-ish aspects of your own character, it’s probably not just something you’ve encountered once. If you’re like me, there’s probably things you do that you don’t enjoy about yourself. I mean, even on The Most Wonderful Day of the Year, I couldn’t find it in myself to give to have a good attitude about giving my Chex mix to neighbors. I joke about it now, but really that’s not a part of myself that I’m not proud of. In the moment, I really was grumpy and selfish in the most petty way. And guess what: if you were to dig into the closet of my soul, you’d find worse. And I know I want to be different.

I know I should repent, and not do that again. But I probably will. Unless... something changes. If only there was some way that I could become more kind, more generous, more full of joy, more brave... more like Jesus.

That day last week, I confessed to Megan what was going on in my heart. I told her what I was feeling inside, even though I was embarrassed about how petty it sounded. But you know what, she was feeling grouchy herself. We had our own little moment of repentance there in our kitchen. I'm so grateful for Jesus and his promise to give us new hearts, because we didn't stop there. Megan prayed a prayer for the both of us that went something like this, "Jesus, we are both feeling grumpy and selfish. We don't want to be like this, especially on this day. Please change our hearts. Give us your Spirit of joy and generosity. Amen."

Later that day, I knocked on a neighbor's door and handed them a bag of my precious Chex mix. And I wasn't even mad about it. I even smiled. I really believe that Jesus changed my heart that day, at least a little. I really believe that he came through on the promise that God made through Ezekiel so many years ago. It wasn't the first time. I can say that Jesus has changed my heart about much deeper things. But I'm glad to say it won't be the last time he does that.

A little bit ago, I was talking about how weird the people of Whoville are. How strange is it that they could remain cheerful in the face of utter, devastating loss. How remarkable it is that they would welcome in the creature who would inflict such pain on them, even allow him to be at the head of their table. But the history of the Christian faith is filled with stories of people who have done exactly this kind of thing, followers of Jesus who have shown great joy in the face of adversity, who have forgiven horrible atrocities, who have shown radical love and mercy. Why? Because they had been baptized with the Holy Spirit.

Every year at the beginning of the year, we do a baptism service. It's fitting, isn't it? At the time of year we are considering a new leaf, why shouldn't we consider the promise of new life that Jesus brings? If you've never been baptized, consider this sermon at the very least as an invitation to come to that baptism service on January 5/6. But perhaps it's your chance to be baptized too.

Ultimately, Jesus came to make us new people. We can talk about joy and hope and peace and love as though they are the gifts that Jesus brings, and they are! But we get those things through the Holy Spirit, through the very presence of God inside of us, with us, changing us, making us new. The gift of Christmas is Jesus with us, through his Spirit.

Maybe this morning/evening you're feeling that grinchiness. Maybe it's as simple as feeling grouchy, but maybe it's deeper. Maybe you've never invited Jesus to be a part of your life, and you're desperate for something different. Or maybe you've been coming to church for a long time, but you've never gone more than skin deep. You still feel like you're the same old person with the same old things that drag you down. Maybe today you need to pray a prayer like the one Megan and I prayed that day a couple of weeks ago. This is a prayer that could begin your faith journey, or it could be a prayer that you need to pray again and again. I invite you to say it with me now.

"Jesus, you promise new life. I admit to you that I'm not who I want to be. (Take a moment to consider the things you regret doing). Jesus, you can give me a new heart. Give me your Spirit, who changes me from the inside out. Today, help me to be more like you. Amen."